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AUTHOR	Hefferlin, JB Lon
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ABSTRACT

This article is the 7th in a series of AAHE research reports. It summarizes research that has been done on academic reform and the resistance to it and speculates what this research implies for future practice. Academic or curricular change is first of all organizational change and colleges and universities are organized and run in such a way as to prevent interference, meddling, and rapid change. Like other organizations, they change as the result of pressure for change, and they adapt their operations to retain equilibrium. The major variables that determine this process of adjustment are: (1) individual, and refer to the advocates interested in change; (2) environmental, and refer to the resources available for change; and (3) structural, and refer to the openess of institutions to change. There are two alternative paths for reform: (1) change the structure from within; and (2) leave the institution and establish a competitive institution that embodies one's views. The most effective reformers ride the crest of reform, and the 1970's seem propitious for effecting curricular change. (AF)

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Reform and Resistance *by JB Lon Hefferlin*

This series of AAHE research reports is made possible by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The goal of the series is to summarize the thrust of current research on selected topics and to speculate on what this research implies for future practice.

Coordinator of the series is K. Patricia Cross, director of college programs, Educational Testing Service, and research educator, Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley.

Questions concerning the article—sources, data, and the like—should be addressed to the author, JB Hefferlin, co-director, Academic Administration Project, Ellis L. Phillips Foundation, at the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, 2150 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, California 94704.

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"There is a crying need for reform," Caplow and McGee wrote about the universities in *The Academic Marketplace* in 1958, "and very little significant reform has occurred. Among other reasons, this is because we do not know enough about how the present system works." They blamed social scientists and professors for studying every important American institution except their own (7).

During the subsequent 12 years, the need for academic reform has, if anything, intensified. Students have resorted to confrontation and violence; public officials have begun calling for massive educational reorganization; and disenchantment with pedantic busy-work has invaded the ranks of the professoriate itself. But at the same time more and more research has been done on how the academic system works and how it changes; and this research holds implications not only for national higher education policy and institutional governance, but also for individual professors, administrators, and students who want to help improve their institutions.

Facts of Academic Life

Academic or curricular change is first of all *organizational* change. To understand its dynamics requires an understanding of academic organizations. In contrast to intellectual transformations and scholarly advances in the disciplines or even extracurricular trends—all of which can occur in spite of academic organizations—the academic program is *organization-bound*. The college curriculum of necessity is a political compromise about those intellectual and extracurricular developments that are sufficiently respectable and marketable to be institutionalized.

Curricular change seems difficult because colleges, just as other institutions, exist for the sake of order in human life. They function to routinize interaction between people. Consequently they are naturally and inherently antithetical to change. To alter the educational program of a college is to threaten its rationale and existence.

Moreover, the members of *voluntary* organizations, such as professors in colleges (as opposed to conscripts in compulsory institutions), generally believe in what they are doing. They join because they approve of the program and they recruit other members who agree with them. As a result, they continue doing what they believe in until they are convinced to believe in something else.

Third, like other organizations, colleges and universities tend to develop more commitment to their personnel and their procedures than to their purposes (35). They tend to make procedures permanent through what sociologists call the "displacement of goals" and the "formalizing of routine." That is, the *means* they adopt—such as lectures and examinations—to accomplish their ends slowly tend to become their goals (9, pp. 191-195). For instance, professors may come to say, "My job is to lecture. If students don't learn, it's their fault." College libraries may come to conceive of their job as storing *books* rather than *information*. And institutional survival may come to be considered a goal in itself. Under such conditions, when learning is no longer a college's objective, innovations that would increase student learning can easily be rejected.

Next, collegiate reputations do not hinge on curricular innovation. Instead, the highest status colleges and universities are not noted for experimentation but rather for admitting elite students and for quality performance of generally-accepted programs. The ideology of professors and teachers as professional experts provides a rationale for resisting pressure for change from nonprofessionals and outsiders (28).

Finally, colleges and universities are organized in ways that prevent interference, meddling, and rapid change. Most of them require extensive deliberation, coordination, and consensus before major policy changes. And above all, they are conservative by nature since they seek to transmit and perpetuate the cultural heritage (32).

All of these facts combined show why academic change can be resisted far easier than implemented. "Reform easily exhausts the energies of its proponents," lamented Henry Wriston, a retired presidential reformer. ". . . the stubborn, silent, but destructive effect of passive resistance is continuous, pervasive, and insidious. A change voted is merely a challenge to resistance; the vote is preliminary to the real battle." (39) Thus the effective educational reformer must be prepared for an up-hill fight: significant educational change requires effort on several fronts at various levels and by many means, while preserving the status-quo merely requires holding familiar ground.

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Factors Affecting Academic Change

Colleges and universities react *homeostatically* to pressure. They maintain themselves by adjusting themselves as little as necessary to their circumstances—or as the late Bernhard Stern phrased it, by "defensive concession." Like all other organizations, they change as the result of pressure for change, and they adapt their operations to retain equilibrium. If new knowledge is to be admitted, they try to admit it under the same restrictions as previous knowledge. If cut-backs are required, their most peripheral programs and personnel are sluffed off.

The major variables or factors that determine this process of adjustment all function in unison, but they can be separated here into three classes—individual, environmental, and structural. The first refers to the *advocates* interested in change, the second to the *resources* available for change, and the third to the *openness* of institutions to change.

Advocates for Change

Every *organizational* change is linked to *individual* change. Even if outsiders generate a new idea—field work, for example, or intensive courses, or structural linguistics—someone inside the college must be its champion. Whether called reformer, change agent, charismatic leader, product champion, or deviant, the advocate of innovation sparks acceptance and galvanizes support for change. Without advocacy, redirection cannot occur; and when it does occur, advocacy is present—as the recent introduction of ecology and black studies to the curriculum illustrates.

Psychologists investigating the characteristics of advocates for institutional change have identified some correlates of innovativeness—among them security, age, position, and field of specialization (5, 13, 14, 16, 33, 38). For example, personal insecurity tends to breed rigidity rather than advocacy; age tends to reduce changeableness; cosmopolitan interests and acquaintances coincide with experimentation; and innovation tends to stem from individuals who are "marginal" to present practices—for example, in academic life, from faculty in fringe disciplines, from administrators, and above all from students. Gusfield and Riesman have observed among professors, for example, that "on the margins of the disciplines are those who have been unable to internalize the codes of their occupational surroundings or who have not been satisfied with them. It is from these men that there comes the willingness to take risks and the rebelliousness from which innovation is possible; sometimes in research, and quite generally in educational reform." (16)

Historically, students have always been the dominant advocates of academic reform, combining as they do youth, marginality, and little investment in institutional rituals. Frederick Rudolph and other academic historians point to student dissastisfaction as the prodromal impetus for change (34), and upheavals in recent years both at American universities and those throughout the world reinforce their view.

The common denominator of all advocates for change, whether student or faculty, is their perception that *the potential benefits of change outweigh the liabilities.* All of us support changes when we sense more is to be gained from them than from maintaining the status quo, and we resist them if we have more to lose from adopting the unknown and the unfamiliar than we have to win. Some pay-off must be evident—even the simple feeling of greater self-worth and self-respect. Otherwise, why bother? Again and again professors have shown they will fight a proposal rather than switch if they fear the proposal presents a threat. The endemic suspicion of foreign language departments that eliminating the language requirement will eliminate them is one example.

Reformers need to remember that innovative behavior, in Hirschman's words, is a function "of the various costs the individual is likely to incur in the course of such behavior" (19) and, in Edward Banfield's theorem, that efforts to change present policies "will be in proportion to the advantage gained from a favorable outcome multiplied by the probability of influencing the decision." (1) Or as Warren Bennis puts it, there must be "some exigency, dissatisfaction, tension, dilemma, or crisis—some discrepancy between the ideal and the actual—confronting the organization" for reform to be accepted (3). This may explain in part Dwight Ladd's discouraging finding that unless a faculty is already convinced that some change is desirable *even before it begins a self-study,* there is little hope that the results will justify the effort (23).

Two primary means are available to bring about this kind of increased tolerance for change. One is to try to modify the perceptions and attitudes of people regarding present conditions; the other is to replace the people themselves. We all know that new programs—substantive ones like microbiology or structural ones like cluster colleges—often require new personnel; that change can be restricted by the promotion of insiders; and that bringing in outsiders tends to alter institutions (18, 25). What may not be so obvious is how atypical colleges and universities are in relying on the replacement and turnover of personnel to implement change. A chemistry major appears in the catalog when the professor of Greek retires and is replaced by a chemist; compulsory chapel gives way to compulsory sports as the chaplain is superseded by the athletic director.

The available evidence about advocacy suggests several courses of action for anyone interested in altering the curriculum:

- Support advocacy and discussion within the institution.
- Encourage communication and travel.
- Stimulate awareness of social changes and educational needs.
- Develop faculty competence through in-service experience.
- Provide reassurance for experimentation.
- Bring in outsiders from cosmopolitan backgrounds.
- And try to reduce fear of the unknown and untried.

Conversely, to preserve the status quo do the opposite.

Resources for Change

No advocate for either change or the status quo can be successful unless he can win support—and in particular financial support—for his goals (17, p. 187). The flow of funds to higher education, channeled by the most persuasive advocates as spokesmen and lobbyists, determines the course of higher education. Colleges that cannot attract support for their programs either make their programs more marketable or they go out of business.

In other words, institutions of higher education compete for faculty, for students, and for funds—but without funds they can recruit neither faculty nor students. As the pool of funds shifts, institutions alter their programs to keep

up (2, 9, 11, 22, 29, 31, 36, 37). When Greek and Latin won't sell, they try French and German. When women's colleges cannot survive, they try coeducation. And, as Ben-David and Zloczower have pointed out, universities have not been responsible in recent centuries for the development of science; rather society's trend toward science has been responsible for the development of universities (2).

Thus colleges and universities are affected like all other organizations by institutional fashion and bandwagon trends. One the one hand, they are faced with the demand for conformity in order to *obtain* support—for example, deans tend to want as broad and deep a curriculum as possible in order to match those of other colleges (24)—and on the other hand they must be distinctive enough or "marginally different" from competing institutions to *retain* support (20, 26, 31).

To preserve a program unchanged in the face of a declining market, one must either assure a captive audience for it—for example, by requiring it of everyone—or amass a perpetual endowment that avoids the necessity of a market. When the survival of a program is assured, it can choose to ignore its competition. But to change an educational program the reformer must either locate or create a market and resources for the change. New programs will be tolerated in colleges and universities if they bring with them their own support, but they will be actively opposed if existing resources must be tapped to fund them.

Openness to Change

While restrictions on diversity and change are inherent in all institutions, some colleges tolerate greater deviance and advocacy than others. Some permit wide discretion regarding the curriculum, leaving course content up to individual professors and course selection up to individual students. They permit opportunities for empire building, expansion, and exploration by academic entrepreneurs. They encourage their members to seek outside support for independent new ventures. Others do not. They require that change be accepted by all before it can be adopted by any, and they employ a multitude of procedural impediments to discourage untoward proposals.

Openness to change is structural in nature. Complementing the psychological and environmental variables of advocacy and resources, it involves openness particularly in an institution's *norms* and its distribution of *power*.

When Charles W. Eliot commented that "the manners & customs of the Yale Faculty are those of a porcupine on the defensive," he was talking about institutional norms (37). Every college and every department has a general attitude about the limits of tolerable innovation, and its sanctions against violations of this norm range from ostracism to censure, suspension, and expulsion. For example, an institution will typically resist experimentation when it believes it is fighting against the evils of modernism. Here no rewards are possible for change since any change of standards necessarily seems to be a lowering of standards.

Similarly, since tradition defines the untraditional as illegitimate, the more distinctive a college becomes, the more difficult becomes the task of altering its distinctive features. "The theme of the institution becomes reflected in a thousand and one bits of statue and sidewalk, story and song," Burton Clark summarizes after analyzing the distinctive history of Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore, and "doctrine defines a straight line that rules out the zigs and zags of opportunism." (8) To the extent that the maintenance of tradition itself thus becomes an institutional purpose, the institution becomes fossilized (36). As a department or college comes to be viewed as good and sacred in itself—existing for its own perpetuation rather than as a means to other ends—advocacy of change is rejected as heresy and treason. The new is necessarily incompatible with the old; it would be detrimental to historic obligation, nay, to the very essence—or even worse—the very spirit of the institution. ("Computer programming? Unthinkable!") In contrast, norms of openness to challenge and conflict aid reform since they permit dissent, debate and experimentation (27).

The second aspect of an open structure involves the distribution of power, particularly over resources. Equalitarian groups cannot prevent advocacy from arising among their members, and thus they provide a free market for persuasion and influence. But institutions are naturally nonequalitarian: some of their members are accepted as having more authority than others. And while colleges and universities tend to distribute power more diffusely than most other bureaucratic organizations, their most influential and powerful members—those with power over allocation of budgets, over appointments and admissions, over information—exert critical pressure on the curriculum. Despite the growth of faculty and student power, administrators remain the most influential members of colleges regarding academic policy, and their attitudes can markedly influence curricular change (12, 15, p. 500). Where young faculty members and students play a role in educational policy, curricular change tends to be high (18). But in some colleges, curricular power remains vested in oligarchic committees or in the senior faculty (21), and here the curriculum committee typically is the death-bed of academic ideas: it exists to make sure the curriculum "doesn't get out of line" and it seldom reports to the total faculty that it has quietly killed proposals that might breach this line (30). Therefore, to assure change, you must either make sure that leaders are sympathetic to it or else work for diversity of leadership and initiative by reducing hierarchies, sidestepping hurdles, and loosening the authority structure (6).

Analysis and Action

Most reformers are faced initially with two alternatives. The first is to try to alter an institution directly and the second is to leave it and work for or establish a competitive institution that embodies one's views. Albert Hirschman devotes an entire book to this dilemma, which he dubs "voice" versus "exit." It is the dilemma between protest and escape, with boycott serving as a temporary middle-ground (19). Just as pioneering scholars outgrow the constraints of their disciplines and sometimes form new schools of thought, so some reformers of American higher education have chosen the "exit" option and by creating new institutions to compete with the old have reoriented the entire system. Jonathan Baldwin Turner did so through the land-grant colleges, as did Daniel Coit Gilman through the creation of Johns Hopkins. As Warren Bennis says, "someone has to build alternative models, keep the pressure on, invent new living communities. Without this yeasty element—populist organizations in education—nothing can happen." (4) Today's "free universities" and student-run

alternative colleges try in this way to substitute new for old. But as they illustrate, the creation of new institutions is risky, since such institutions typically lack paternity, prestige, and resources and can easily be tagged as illegitimate.

The second path of educational reform—the option of working from within, of redirecting an on-going organization—is more typical. Here the reformer is faced with a new alternative: confrontation versus accommodation—trying to replace the old program with the new or to add the new alongside the old. And here again, the more common tactic is the second: undramatically adding a new function or unit by accreditation to an otherwise unaltered institution (9, 18). In this way, practical programs are admitted alongside traditional ones not as replacements but as adjuncts and electives; new departments such as the history of science are organized alongside those of history and the sciences; and intensive courses are incorporated through a 4-1-4 schedule rather than by reorganizing the entire calendar. Recognizing that to define your opponent as an adversary makes him the enemy, most educational reformers win academic concessions by piecemeal victories.

Finally, the most effective reformers ride the crest of reform, knowing that it is easier to keep at the top of the wave of innovation than either to swim before it or against it. And for academic reformers, the 1970's appear propitious. The tide of curricular change seems to be swelling. The 1950's and 60's were rife with talk about undergraduate innovation, but with precious little action to back it up.

Now major shifts are occurring, not only because more faculty members are recognizing how insufficiently our colleges have met the social crises of the past decade but also because many colleges are driven to reform by the simple press of circumstances. The post-Second World War baby boom has passed; student militance has increased; and alternative institutions to traditional colleges are being planned in competition to them. These circumstances will lead many colleges to improve their programs and lead those that cannot adapt into bankruptcy or oblivion. Not all of these forces will result in improvement, of course; not all of the alterations will increase learning; but the potential for academic improvement has not been greater in decades. Colleges will not change in the seventies for the sake of change, but for the sake of themselves and of humanity. In higher education as elsewhere, as Henry Steele Commager has said, "Change does not necessarily assure progress, but progress implacably requires change." (10)

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